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ABSTRACT

A study investigated how a sample of British further education (FE) colleges used the first round of Competitiveness Funding and how it affected the development of collaboration between colleges, Technical Education Councils (TECs), industry, and government agencies. A key ingredient in successful fund bids was matching the project's activity and outcomes to the needs of the regional economy by colleges' and TECS' sharing of each other's labor market information. Few colleges reported active industrial support for their fund project at the bid-preparation stage. Regional partner agencies were infrequently involved publicly in "launching" the fund, but appeared distant from the bidding, approval, and implementation processes. The likelihood of successful outcomes was enhanced through evident compatibility between fund project activity and existing college planning. Ways in which colleges developed the local training market included targeting small and medium sized enterprises, funding capital development, and breaking down barriers to access. Project innovations were also enhancing colleges' offer to existing students and opening up new markets through the deployment of flexible learning opportunities. Potential benefits from collaborative work with other colleges included the following: sharing good practices, accessing staff expertise and cooperation from the higher education sector, dividing jobs according to strengths of partner colleges, and enhancing purchasing power. (YLB)

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FEDA Further Education Development Agency

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MARIA HUGHES

Competing for business: colleges and the Competitiveness Fund

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Following publication of the first Competitiveness Paper *Helping Business to Win* (HMSO, 1994) FEDA investigated how a sample of FE colleges used the first round of Competitiveness Funding and how it affected the development of collaboration between colleges, TECs, industry and Government agencies.

This bulletin contains findings and comments from that project. It identifies critical success factors and demonstrates the changes resulting from Competitiveness Fund (CF) activity. It highlights the reluctance of other agencies to go beyond practical, short-term help to sustained strategic or financial support.

The bulletin further reports the key messages emerging from this work, which may have a wider application to future Competitive Fund initiatives, and provides useful pointers to the success of future FE/TEC collaboration. As such it should interest college and TEC senior managers, FEFC Regional Officers and Government Office Education Advisers.

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Background

The first Competitiveness White Paper acknowledged that prosperity and economic effectiveness depend upon a better educated workforce. Significantly, it noted the role of the then newly incorporated FE colleges as major players in the development of a skilled workforce and, by implication, the economic development of the country.

New arrangements for promoting closer collaboration between FE colleges and TECs were proposed, and a central plank of these was the Competitiveness Fund of some £20m p.a. Colleges can bid for resources from this Fund to develop training opportunities to update or create skills necessary to support the local or regional economy.

Participating colleges

The colleges involved in the FEDA research were all engaged in technology-based developments and projects involving partnerships with other colleges. They represented a range of types operating in a variety of contexts across the country. Extracts from the case studies are quoted throughout this bulletin.

College/region involved in FEDA work	Partner(s)/CF-project focus
Preston College / Accrington & Rossendale College (North West)	*Lancashire Consortium of colleges: to offer small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) access to information networks on a county-wide basis, concentrating on open and flexible learning and exploiting the latest benefits of multi-media and information technology*
South Trafford College / Salford College (North West)	*Greater Manchester Consortium of colleges: to work with local employers to develop multi-media approaches to enhance the delivery and assessment aspects of Modern Apprenticeships*
Abingdon College / North Oxfordshire College (South East)	*Oxfordshire Consortium of colleges: establishing a network for the application of telematics, providing employers with tailor-made training provision in IT, communication, sales and basic skills*
Isle College (East)	*collaboration with Stamford College: new technology initiative for access, participation and upskilling in rural areas*
Chesterfield College (East Midlands)	*collaboration with North Notts/West Notts Colleges: modern technology and the Internet (CD-ROM, Multimedia and Internet development, plus links with HE)*
York College (Yorkshire and Humberside)	*collaboration with Askham Bryan College and University of York: biosciences*
Hull College (Y&H)	*collaboration with Grimsby CAT: use of computer-aided learning in the field of electronics and the use of modern computer-based systems for motor vehicle systems training*

A major issue that emerges from the study is that where economic regeneration is the spur to collaboration, help from the local authority's economic development unit, and senior-level contact with key local players (including HE) are particularly important. At least one of the projects was specifically engendered by a multi-agency initiative to develop a training response for an in-coming industry.

> *Working collaboratively with industry requires the ability to listen and respond to the issues and needs identified, rather than going to them with 'the answer'. This consultative approach has been used extensively for our 1996 bid. Support and advice have been freely offered both by local companies and individuals, and by professional bodies.*

The 1995-6 Competitiveness Fund activity shows clearly the importance of accurate information about local training needs:

> *Labour market intelligence was a key influence, as was our knowledge of local industrial development intentions.*

> *One of the key factors for securing TEC support appears to be the ability to indicate clearly that the bid/project takes account of and meets the needs of industry and those employed within it rather than simply focusing on the needs of the college and its students.*

This extends to information and support from employers, as well as TEC-derived material:

> *Support from external bodies and individuals is essential if the bid is to be successful. There has to be an identified need and support for the bid, particularly from industry. Heavy emphasis is now placed in the 1996 bidding guidance on the need to access and identify a range of LMI sources.*

A few colleges have successfully involved local employers in active membership of steering groups.

> *We have exploited existing links in establishing the Project Steering Group, drawing on a small number of local employer representatives relating specifically to the project interests. They have also been encouraged to provide advice and guidance on the project's interface with the target industry, and on raising the profile of the training facility being established. This has been very useful.*

One college reports seeking — and gaining — pertinent and money-saving advice from local industry on technical matters as part of project implementation. Another college brought in a senior purchasing officer as a consultant from the county council to deal with a complex tendering process. Yet another indicates that the innovatory nature of the activity can help secure favourable deals from IT suppliers:

> *We have been able to negotiate free installation and free trial agreements in some areas that meant we could 'try before we buy' and ensure suitability and value for money.*

Key findings

- colleges need to develop capability in high technology areas to be ready to respond to demands for training. This may require a great leap of faith by all concerned, including those responsible for allocating funds
- colleges need to develop systems to obtain and use labour market information (LMI) effectively, from their own and from external sources
- colleges, TECs and others need to alert SMEs to the opportunities new technology brings
- colleges should enhance their consultancy role to industry, helping employers to develop their competitiveness through technology-based business and production techniques. This should be supported by flexible learning programmes and materials

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- TECs need to ensure that the LMI supplied to colleges provides clear evidence of need and likely demand on which colleges can base their submissions to the Competitiveness Fund

- sub-regional groups need to be clear about the potential use of new technologies in supporting economic development, ensuring that equal effort is given to promoting demand and supplying training. Securing the active involvement of employers in these initiatives should be a major priority

- industry-focused developments in training should be applied to enhance the learning experience of mainstream students to ensure that future workers develop relevant skills and knowledge

- technology-based learning should be used to break down barriers to learning, particularly those of physical access, and to enhance lifetime learning

Inter-college collaboration in Competitiveness Fund projects carries the following benefits:

- a greater contribution to the economic development strategy of the area, and a recognition of FE as one of the major agencies in this process

- establishing and developing access links through telematics to all available education and training: a 'knowledge exchange'

- professional development for staff who increasingly tend to remain in one college and therefore have no broad 'context' for their own profession

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Needs analysis and labour market information

A key ingredient in successful Competitiveness Fund bids is matching the project's activity and outcomes to the needs of the regional economy. All the colleges used TEC-supplied LMI to support their bids but some were able to draw on a wider range of needs analysis, including their own examination of local trends:

> *A growing demand for IT was evident from LMI and from enrolment trends. Social Labour Market Information Surveys covering one third of the local workforce, revealed that 38% of companies required IT training. Surveys conducted as part of the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) Project also revealed high levels of demand for IT training which led us to plan a new training suite of computers in the town centre. This was later confirmed by significant increases in college IT and DTP enrolments.*

Several colleges questioned the direct relevance of TEC-supplied LMI in confirming *demand* for Competitiveness Fund proposals:

> *We could recognise, strategically, the priorities identified, but had little indication that employers either wanted or were prepared to pay for training. Colleges were told that Competitiveness Funding would 'help build up the market'. The industrial liaison underpinning our bid involved programme area/industry links established over a number of years. While TEC LMI is very useful in terms of its strategic direction, the college benefited more from information gained from direct links it already had.*

> *The bid criteria produced by the TEC included basic sector analysis LMI, which was of some use in focusing the bid. But the need for greater college-specific LMI in a user-friendly format remains unmet.*

Examining the training needs of local SMEs was beset with difficulties:

> *One drawback lies in the difficulty in identifying representative employers. Small to medium employers are hard to contact, and it's difficult to draw up aggregated conclusions about their needs from such a large and heterogeneous group.*

This is echoed in another college's suggestion that colleges and TECs need to work more closely to ensure that both are fully informed of training opportunities offered by colleges and those sought by employers.

Thus for many colleges the significant missing element from the 1995-6 Competitiveness Fund bid was any systematic consultation with industry. There simply wasn't the time. Colleges relied on their existing knowledge of what was required, based on their everyday contacts with SMEs.

This points to the need for better partnership arrangements between colleges and TECs to share each other's labour market information. Colleges collect a lot of information in their day-to-day dealings with employers and other clients. They are increasingly required to know more about the labour market and to tailor their provision more exactly to current and future needs of the economy. If the resulting information were gathered systematically and to an agreed format, it would be a useful addition to TEC information.

Industrial support

Few colleges reported active industrial support for their Competitiveness Fund project at the bid-preparation stage. While the deadlines were tight, the nature of the developments seems also to have been a deterrent, especially in terms of direct financial contribution:

> *Our partner college secured a modest financial contribution. However, collaboration with industry has tended to be more on supporting evidence of need than in agreeing matched funds. Employers will often fund the college directly for training but are less inclined to commit time and matched funding for speculative projects. SMEs approached for indications of support indicated that they would be interested in the resultant training but did not want to participate in the bid.*

> *We therefore concentrated on communicating and promoting the facility. Once firms are contacted they have shown further interest. More interest has been shown from a sector outside the primary focus of our project. We don't see this as a failure — more of an indication of the need to train students at college before they enter work in the target industry.*

This highlights the difficulty of promoting training for skills for which industry has yet to recognise the need, let alone decide to support financially.

Some colleges expect greater involvement by employers when projects are fully under way. One perceives a great deal of local interest in hi-tech / multi-media initiatives, and expects involvement in CF activity as a result. The consensus is, however, that the need identified by LMI, which underpins national Competitiveness Fund priorities, is yet to be converted into demand in any significant way.

> *Employers are unwilling to become involved because they are simply unaware of the implications of the new technology. When suitable learning material is produced the idea could be sold to employers.*

This seems to be a characteristic employer response, with much more demand for short-term activity than for speculative initiatives. Colleges are perhaps rightly not 'pushing' their developing capability until they are fully able to respond to any forthcoming demand:

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Some of the hardware/software solutions that we have implemented are new. We are very conscious of 'breaking new ground'.

All the equipment is being used, but it is really in the second year of operation that the facilities will become fully integrated into the curriculum offer. This is particularly true of short course provision for industry. Staff feel they must be au fait with the operation and applications of the technology before offering full cost training or offering firms the opportunity to access the equipment for their own use.

More often, however, the feeling is that potential markets have yet to be awakened to their needs and that, for now, Competitiveness Fund activity is highly speculative. There is scope for further college/TEC collaboration to ensure that the local training market is fully alerted to Competitiveness Fund developments, whether through TEC 'brokerage' of college services or through funding for awareness-raising activity for SMEs.

Involving the regional partner agencies

Despite the composition of sub-regional groupings — largely Government Offices and FEFC regional offices — the 1995/6 Competitiveness Fund appears to colleges to be primarily a TEC-led initiative. In a few cases FEFC regional offices were publicly involved in 'launching' the Competitiveness Fund through their presence at briefing meetings but have otherwise appeared distant from the bidding, approval and implementation processes.

While all colleges in the sample worked within the guidance available, there was — and perhaps remains — some scepticism about the relevance of sub-regional analysis to the local situation:

The guidelines for bidding represent a top-down view of priorities rather than needs identified from a genuine consultation with training providers and SMEs about what would be helpful at the local level. The justification for the approach tends to lie in the over-riding importance attributed to NTETs and in TEC labour market assessments and surveys, which are often too general to be relevant to the circumstances of individual organisations.

This may indicate the lack of specific knowledge within the CF decision making structures of the real potential of new technology as an aid to economic development.

Alignment with colleges' strategic plans

Colleges which are already in touch with their local economy and take a responsive and pro-active approach are clearly better prepared to take on the challenges of the Competitiveness Fund. Some colleges in the sample were able to draw on existing college plans to focus their proposal:

The aims and objectives of the initiative fit into the strategic and operational plans of all three colleges. All are committed to developing IT capability and pilot developments had already been undertaken to establish the market need within areas of the community, delivering training using modern technology and student-centred approaches to learning. This college had opened an FHE campus to provide programmes in IT and business studies at Level 3 and above. The Competitiveness Fund enabled state-of-the-art technology to be purchased and installed and provide connection to the information superhighway. This will attract more participants from the region and make us a centre of excellence in this rapidly expanding field.

This Competitiveness Fund project dovetailed into another longer-term, multi-agency initiative responding to the planned relocation of significant national players in the biosciences industry to a particular part of the country. A Biosciences Training Initiative Group had been established in 1994, led by key players for further and higher education and the TEC, to prepare, plan for and promote the area as a potential international centre of excellence for biosciences and raise the profile of science as a modern career opportunity.

For these colleges, the Competitiveness Fund came to the right people at the right time. Other case studies, however, highlight potential difficulties in aligning externally-prompted initiatives with existing college plans:

> *The Competitiveness Fund creates a tension between the need to demonstrate 'additionality' and fulfil regionally and nationally derived criteria and yet not disrupt careful strategic and development planning in colleges where there is little unaccounted projected spend. There is often an element of risk in such a project. Logically, if there was an overwhelming demand for the service and it was likely to be economically costed then the college would already be doing it. CF encourages a level of considered speculation. While this can be helpful, the experience of initiating and managing such a project is often difficult as the matched-funding element can divert college funds from other priority areas.*

This anxiety may result partly from the focus of the project and partly from ways in which a college can account for its matching contribution to the overall project budget.

The extent to which individual colleges have been able to integrate Competitiveness Fund activity is dependent on the specificity of sub-regional priorities and on the latitude shown by the TEC in accounting for the 'additionality' sought. The impression given by the case-studies is that the likelihood of successful outcomes is enhanced where there is evident compatibility between Competitiveness Fund project activity and existing college planning.

Developing the local training market

Sub-regional priorities have in many instances led colleges to target SMEs. One college which has not formerly been very successful in developing business links is developing a marketing strategy to target local firms in advance of new equipment coming on stream in the second year of the current project. In another instance, where there are highly developed relationships with a large number of SMEs, a franchising operation is being developed with value being added to company training programmes by the college assuring quality and arranging accreditation:

> *New SME contacts have been made which are increasingly involving us in advising on and providing training materials to companies, and in considering direct links with companies via IT. The project intended to develop mechanisms by which SMEs would be able to customise learning packages and gain access to e-mail and information systems according to their individual needs. We are doing this through existing — but now enhanced — structural networks, including our CAD/CAM User Group and a well-established Technology Unit.*

Funding for capital development has augmented some colleges' training facilities, enabling them to respond more fully to industrial needs:

> *... a key intended outcome was the provision of new facilities to deliver IT training to discrete groups from industry and commerce. The Competitiveness Fund project has solved a long-standing accommodation problem, making it more realistic for us to market such training, hence enabling us to become proactive rather than reactive.*

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Individual colleges have also been able to extend their responsiveness to particular client groups in the local community. In one case, the introduction of more flexible electronics learning has enabled the college to address its current offer to disabled people:

> *The project has enabled the production of support materials and the development of strategies to improve disabled access as well as meeting TEC priorities for improving and encouraging participation in new technology training by SMEs. The TEC has proved to be particularly supportive of this.*

Elsewhere, a useful knock-on effect is that materials purchased for application in SMEs can be used with other client groups. Another college highlights the way in which the Competitiveness Fund project will enable it to contribute to lifetime learning by breaking down barriers to access:

> *We will be able to offer education and training to those who find it difficult to come to college by offering superhighway links via modems.*

Colleges highlight staff's raised awareness of multi-media training materials, and their resulting demands for in-service training.

Effects on the FE curriculum

Several colleges stressed the extent to which project innovations are enhancing their offer to existing students as well as opening up new markets. This is apparent in the deployment of flexible learning opportunities:

> *The college has consistently attempted to deliver the curriculum more flexibly, largely through the development of paper-based learning packages.*
>
> *Increasingly there has been a focus on CD-ROM and other computer based learning. The opportunity to further develop flexible learning packages through up-to-date technology accelerates this development.*

Project activity has fuelled development of high technology distance learning and assessment and enabled colleges to develop areas of the curriculum much sooner than expected. Another college reports that:

> *Future curriculum development will include learning packages using CD-ROMs, and possibly the development of a CD-ROM authoring capability on a commercial basis. The arrival of the wide area network will stimulate further curriculum development in the art and design area. For example, we have a plan for a new multi-media Foundation Course to run alongside traditional programmes.*

It is also clear that there is an opportunity to target industry and others via full-cost short-course provision, especially in the use, rather than applications, of new technology:

> *The college has a team of staff who have been responsible for producing the original specification for the tendering process and the installation of the equipment. Their work has covered installation of the ISDN line and the connection to JANET. This group has now mounted new short courses on multi-media and the superhighway. It is expected that the curriculum on offer locally will develop further. Short courses on e-mail, superhighway, WWW, multi-media authoring and video conferencing will be provided*

Few colleges report any significant short-term impact on recruitment into regular FE provision as a result of project activity; the following seems typical:

> *Given the vagaries of funding we have not revised our 1995/96 FEFC planning numbers in the light of Competitiveness Fund activity; 180 part-time students (our share of the target) is not a*

significant number. Plans for 1996-7 have centred on redistribution of numbers to different programme areas. In retrospect, given that the equipment is only now coming on stream, I believe this to have been a correct decision.

In one case, however, the direct effect of Competitiveness Fund activity has been both widespread and dramatic:

We are attracting new students onto existing courses, and providing new qualifications for the local community. We are currently targeting school teachers, employees from local industry and private individuals to take up 'stand alone' NVQ and GNVQ units. As a result of these initiatives we are extending the opening hours of the college out-centre to times that will facilitate access to the new equipment and the training programmes available.

This college was one of the first to have 'gone live' during the period of the FEDA investigation. Others may see similar market growth once they too are able to offer direct hands-on experience of the new technologies secured through the Competitiveness Fund.

The general view is that, in addition to an increase in individualised study and new course provision, Competitiveness Fund initiatives will result in students on all courses benefiting from access to multi-media and Internet facilities to improve learning strategies. As one college explains:

The purchase of the equipment and setting up the facilities is shaping full-time, part-time and short-course curriculum development. In particular, it is enabling more flexible approaches including open learning, computer simulation and planning prior to hands-on experience of more dangerous equipment, or outreach opportunities prior to attendance at college for more advanced programmes. The initiative has its roots in the curriculum. The equipment and the environment which were subsequently planned were simply the means of achieving our curricular objectives.

Enhancing college standing and relationships

The effect of participation in Competitiveness Fund activity on colleges' local standing is difficult to assess. Many case studies report favourable perceptions of the project and its results to date from both external agencies and the college governing body. Several draw attention to their hope that successful execution of their 1995-6 proposals will stand them in good stead with other potential funders and/or future applications:

Collaboration with other colleges and with industry can only enhance our standing. A history of well-organised and thriving projects will suggest to other funders that a worthwhile contribution is being made to training in the area. This is possible, however, only if success is known about. The current project has had little or no publicity, which may be due to marketing and publicity functions not being assigned to a designated college/individual within the consortium arrangements.

Many case studies testify to positive relations with TECs:

The TEC's level of activity and commitment during this initiative has been evident, and college management has been impressed with the TEC's higher profile.

Some colleges have found unexpected benefits from Competitiveness Fund activity through collaboration with other participating organisations:

The project has required not just the purchase of equipment for use in outreach locations, but also extensive negotiations and planning with the individual centres about how the training would take place, be monitored etc and about issues such as security. Although the smallest part of the project, it opened up opportunities for rethinking access to training and links with community organisations.

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Why collaborate?

Case studies highlight the extent to which, despite competitive tensions, most colleges continue to work together. In many instances pre-incorporation models of working continue and in some, relations seem even more productive than before. Several colleges report that initial guidance from Government Offices for 1995-6 bids made it clear that inter-college collaboration would be expected. Even where they did not, some colleges — often prompted by TEC advice — judged a collaborative approach to be beneficial.

In one case, one partner college is to establish a centre for resource-based learning for electronics and communications industries and another will become the main local centre for a resource-based learning approach to fault diagnosis and repair in autotronics. In the second year of the project, a reciprocal development will take place and the colleges will be able to learn from each other's experience.

Sixth-form colleges may find it difficult to contribute to industry-focused bids. Partnerships are not usually equal. One college involved in a three-way partnership indicated that the lesser involvement of the sixth-form college was largely a result of the vocational focus of the bid rather than the lack of commitment on the part of the sixth-form college.

Case-studies identified a range of potential benefits arising from collaborative work with other colleges. These include:

- sharing a wider pool of experience and knowledge about good practice
- exchanging different software and joint contacts with external agencies to access and share information and learning resources
- jointly accessing staff expertise and co-operation from the HE sector
- dividing jobs according to the strengths of the partner colleges
- enhancing purchasing power in a big project
- sharing costs for external expertise, where required
- greater scope in developing specialist expertise (e.g. in tendering) and sharing it rather than requiring each to duplicate it
- establishing a collective FE voice across the area
- dealing with the local TEC on an equal level when all the colleges agree an issue
- potentially extending the network to other parts of the sub-region

As one of the colleges noted:

> *The benefits of the collaboration have included the chance to discuss implementation strategies and gain from the experiences of others with more knowledge in the field of electronic networking. Although we have implemented differing solutions in some cases the discussion with the other colleges and need to justify our choices has been very rewarding*

The national scope of initiatives like the Competitiveness Fund is seen by some as affording a further benefit from which many can learn:

> *Individual colleges can only be at the leading edge on a limited number of fronts at any one time. Perhaps the CF allows the sector to be at the leading edge on a wide range of fronts that can then be used as exemplars for the rest of the sector.*

Colleges highlight other necessary features of a successful inter-college collaboration:

The management of any collaborative project takes time. The importance of this cannot be overstated. From the original bid, involving discussions and amendment of original plans to the day-to-day detail of technical implementation there has been the extra dimension of contacting, discussing, agreeing and sharing experiences and expertise across all the colleges.'

In broad terms there would appear to be few drawbacks from inter-college collaboration other than in the need to invest considerable pump-priming or development time in the early stages of the collaboration. Equally, there needs to be effective management of such partnerships with clear roles, responsibilities and accountabilities.

Colleges recognised the particular benefits that can accrue from joining other providers:

In terms of size and involvement in high technology projects, we consider ourselves to be one of the weaker partners. Collaboration under the Competitiveness Fund provides more benefits for us than the other colleges, who are already well advanced in such developments.

A leap of faith?

Several case studies suggest that Competitiveness Fund activity has not yet made a significant impact on working with industry.Potential employer markets have yet to be awakened to their needs and many colleges suspect that smaller firms, especially, have yet to acknowledge the need for hi-technology, multi-media training. This rather undermines the assumptions underpinning regional/sub-regional Competitiveness Fund priorities and individual consortium proposals.

Much of the equipment remains, at present, a solution in search of an application, but we discern growing interest from local high schools in our developments — a somewhat different client-group than the SMEs which are the target for this Competitiveness Fund project.

Colleges suggest that in new technologies and innovatory computer-based training providers need to have the supply-side ready before demand is evident. Response-time is such — planning, market research, equipment purchase, curriculum development, software selection and promotion of the facility —that if providers wait, the technology could have 'moved on' by the time provision was in place.

Similar difficulties exist where the project focus relates to in-coming industry:

Even at the stage of bidding it was acknowledged by all of the key players that the bid itself was in many ways an act of faith — measuring success in terms of meeting unknown needs in a new industrial sector involved a certain level of crystal ball gazing with few guarantees.

In both contexts colleges and their funding partners need to speculate about likely demand on the basis of their own assessment of need: thus outcome-related monitoring should not be the sole criterion against which project success is evaluated. In this sense, to regard equipment purchased through Competitiveness Fund activity as 'a solution in search of an application' should not necessarily be seen as a negative comment.

What next?

Colleges can both form and inform the market, priming and focusing demand by developing supply-side readiness — offering practical demonstrations of equipment and sample learning materials. Some of the colleges in this sample, especially those with one-year projects, well down the road of implementation, are already trying to do this through, for example, practical half-day demonstrations, short 'taster' courses, focused publicity and multi-media units on courses where students — recruited direct from industry — can act as advocates of the 'new learning'.

More extensive investment in market-priming activities is, however, difficult given that most colleges have little spare money for initiatives where the end-result is untested. As the main funding mechanism for FE colleges focuses on the successful delivery of qualification-bearing programmes and the Competitiveness Fund is restricted to capital development, marketing and promotion are difficult to resource.

One college, recognising these difficulties, is currently negotiating with a TEC for part-funding of training and awareness sessions for SMEs. Greater 'venture investment' like this is required. Colleges can become 'consultants' to local firms (especially SMEs) working with them not only to provide a specific response to identified training needs but also to alert them to the new possibilities that high technology brings to learning and to business development.

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